

NORTH BRANCH CANAL

INTRODUCTION: *The Morning Press*, a Bloomsburg newspaper, in its annual anniversary edition published on February 22, 1940, included an article entitled, “Many Changes in Transportation Systems Noted.” It began by drawing attention to how parts of the old North Branch Canal, that followed the north side of the Susquehanna River, had become a dump site for ashes and other refuse which was gradually erasing its imprint. It was seen as an act of disrespect to the unnamed author who lamented the fact that the importance of the canal to the economic growth of Susquehanna Valley in the nineteenth century was rapidly fading from the public mind. The canal became a relic of the past as the country increased its reliance on the railroad and then the truck.

The following is an excerpt [a verbatim copy except for some punctuation, spelling, and minor corrections] from the article that provides a brief historical overview of the North Branch Canal. The writer had high praise for the role this water highway had as it traversed Montour and Columbia Counties. For its time period, it constituted a significant advancement in transportation. The canal photographs come in part from the Robert Young collection at the Society. Some editorial corrections were made as to punctuation and spelling

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Let’s turn back the pages of history, back more than a century and a half.

The Susquehanna was to be the water way of the region at the start. It was declared a navigable highway by the Provincial Assembly in 1772. “Durham” boats, so named for a town below Easton where they were built, were the first to navigate the river. They were sixty feet long, eight feet wide and two feet deep, and drew twenty-inches of water when loaded with fifteen tons of merchandise. Four men, with setting poles, moved them against the current at the rate of two miles an hour.

That was pretty slow even in those days and many attempts were made to increase their speed mechanically before the invention of steam. Isaac A. Chapman, in 1824, built a boat at Nescopeck designed to operate by horse power, but it failed after repeated trials and was fittingly named the “Experiment.”



Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad paralleled the North Branch Canal between Danville and Bloomsburg.

Farmers and merchants of these counties resorted to the use of “arks,” rafts and flats for the transportation of their merchandise, but they often lost the results of months of labor in a few moments in the rapids and eddies of the stream. Just what a task it was those of the present generation realized through the tragic journey of the “last raft” in the spring of 1838.

According to publications of the day, the trade on the Susquehanna in 1824, by means of “arks,” rafts and what have you, from Columbia County, was 100,000 bushels of wheat, 3,000 bushes of clover seed, 3,000 barrels of whiskey, 250 tons of pork and a small amount of lumber. Even in that day it appeared that the forests along the watercourses were beginning to be completely exhausted.

In April, 1826, the *Codorus*, a steamer built at York Haven and commanded by Captain Elger, passed Berwick on its way to Wilkes-Barre and Binghamton. The following month Captain Collins, in the *Susquehanna*, a larger boat, attempted to pass the falls of Nescopeck, opposite Berwick, and in the attempt the boiler exploded, killing four and wounding a large number of passengers.

Thus right at a time when river transportation seemed to be progressing at a rate which would never allow a canal to be constructed, the proposition of a canal became a foremost issue, a pressing need.

They didn’t want to give up the river without a struggle and there were propositions made to build a series of dams across the river, but these never went beyond the discussion stage.

The North Branch canal, which was an extension of the Pennsylvania State canal system was begun in 1828, the first excavation being celebrated at Berwick by a military parade and salutes from cannon. Alexander Jameson drove the oxen and Nathan Beach held the plow handles as the first furrows were turned.¹

The North Branch Canal began at Northumberland and extended to the New York state line, there connecting with a canal to Elmira; thence boats were towed down Seneca Lake to the branch of the Erie Canal, through which either the Atlantic or the Great Lakes could be easily reached.

The canal was opened as far as Nanticoke falls in September 1831, the Wyoming extension to Pittston, seventeen miles, was completed in 1834; the Tioga branch to connect with the New York canal system was begun in 1836; also the line from Pittston to Athens. The Tunkhannock line was started two years later.

The North Branch Canal Company was incorporated in 1843 and took over the unfinished portion between the Lackawanna River and the New York state line, but did not carry out the contract and in 1848 the state regained control of that part. The entire canal and its branches were finally completed in 1853, but not fully opened until 1856 when the *Tonawanda* passed up from Pittston to Elmira with a barge of coal. The total cost of the North Branch Canal and its branches was \$1,598,379.34, real money then and real money now even in these days of alphabet agencies, wars and rumors of wars.

The length of the canal through Columbia and Montour [Counties] was about twenty-four miles. In this section there were five locks, located at Bloomsburg,

Rupert, Berwick, Lime Ridge and one near Danville. They were twenty feet wide, twenty feet deep, with three sets of gates at distances of ninety feet. They were substantially constructed on earth lines and with stone, covered with a wooden sheathing fastened to the stones by iron rods and wedges. The capstones along the walls were of Pottsville conglomerate, fastened together with iron staples sunk in holes previously filled with melted lead.

These locks were so well constructed that they would have been usable years after the canal was abandoned. The ability of the old canal builders was shown by the aqueduct at Rupert which for years was used as the piers for the bridge of the old North Branch Transit Company, which has passed from the picture as has the canal.

In 1830, the first canal boat, the *Wyoming* – built at Northumberland, passed through Bloomsburg and Berwick, with the canal as yet not completed. The following year the *Luzerne* came up the canal. In 1835 the first boats built exclusively for passenger trade, the *Denison* and the *Gertrude*, constructed by Miller Horton and A. H. Cahoon, were launched at Northumberland for the trade between that point and Wilkes-Barre.

They were drawn by six horses. For a period of some years before the advent of the railroads the canal was a favorite route for passenger traffic, being more comfortable and less expensive than the stages. Many picnics and excursions were made up and the practice continued even down to the last years of the life of the canal system when small light-draft steamers were used for the purpose.

Boatyards were established at Espy, Northumberland and Wilkes-Barre, where the boats were built and repaired. The canal company in later years operated its own boats, but any person could carry on a freight business by paying the regular tolls and complying with the rules. In winter the canal was emptied of water and all necessary repairs were then made. In the spring it was necessary to mow the long grass in the canal bed before the water was let in as it greatly interfered with rapid transit.

For some years the business done by the canal was large. It was the main avenue to the seaboard and the freight rates were low. Compared to freight rates of today they were, in fact, meager.

Canal boats were on an average eight-five feet long and drew two feet of water when loaded. The average depth of the canal was five feet. The largest cargo ever shipped in one boat was a miced [*sic*] one 285 tons.

The entire canal system in this section of the state was sold in 1853 to the Sunbury and Erie Railroad Company and by them to the North Branch Canal Company. In 1869 it was sold to the Pennsylvania Railroad Company, which formed the subsidiary company that for years operated it under the name of the Pennsylvania Canal Company.

In 1880 the traffic on the canal began to decline and in ten years after that it became apparent that the canal would have to be abandoned. The unprecedented freshets [floods] of 1889 had destroyed the Juniata division from Newton Hamilton

to Rope Ferry, a distance of fifty-six miles and the West Branch canal was also damaged, all that portion was of the Loyalsock being almost totally destroyed. Having no connection below Northumberland, the canal became almost useless and was finally abandoned in 1891. Later the Pennsylvania railroad sold it to the D. L. & W. [Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad] and the old canal bed provides some of the right of way for that system.

That's the history of the old canal and it's proud of its part in progress. Now, motor truck, are you just a little ashamed of hauling ashes down to the old bed and literally throwing dirt in the face of a hearty pioneer that did its part in the progress of this great section of the country.

¹ For an account that described the ceremony that began the excavation for the North Branch Canal see the newspaper article, "Gala Day in 1828 at Berwick as Ground Broken for Canal," published in the *Berwick Enterprise* on June 26, 1935. It is in volume two of historical essays on the Society's Web page